

Citizen voices are key to COVID response in education

By Natalie McCutchen, Annette Hines, and Spandana Pavuluri,

Add to Kentucky's groundswell of education influencers some innovative, if earnest, laypeople.

We are part of a citizen research team of school stakeholders. We call ourselves the "Intergen 9", and we comprise three parents, three teachers, and three students representing eight districts across the Commonwealth, including five people of color. We were supported by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence to co-design a study to amplify the voices of Kentucky teachers and families navigating the COVID-19 crisis.

We developed our [Coping with COVID Teacher and Family Survey](#) in the late summer and disseminated it widely through our family and teacher networks in the weeks leading up to and including the start of the new school year. We also conducted peer interviews with teachers and parents and targeted African Americans, parents of children with special needs, lower income families, grandparents raising grandchildren, and others who were underrepresented in our survey results. And we learned a lot.

Despite the politics around COVID-19, for many Kentucky teachers and families, the concern around safety is grounded in reality. Of the 2,068 people from 111 of Kentucky's 120 counties who responded to our survey, 32% of teachers and 21% of parents said they personally know someone who has died from the disease. And 42% of teachers and 25% of parents said they consider themselves at high risk for developing complications from COVID-19 themselves.

Ever since schools closed for the pandemic last spring, more Kentucky teachers and families are expressing new needs for help. Fully 36% of teachers and 21% of parents who told us they were not using mental health services before the pandemic said they would benefit from mental health support but don't currently have any. And just about half of teachers told us that they are feeling both less supported and less valued now than they did last March.

Our citizen research team further found that while some Kentuckians are finding benefits to remote K-12 instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, many families and teachers face significant challenges in teaching and learning from home. Consider:

- 12% of families said they did not have reliable access to the internet;
- 21% of families said that providing care for their child at home while they work is a big concern;
- 15% of teachers said they must share the devices they use for teaching with others in their home; and,
- 33% of teachers said they only sometimes or never have access to a distraction-free environment when teaching from home.

Our Coping with COVID study delves deeper into issues of communication and teacher and family morale and makes recommendations for improvement. Our suggestions include advocating for increased funding for technology, creating more internet hot spots, and leveraging community-based organizations to provide access to licensed counselors, social workers, and other mental health professionals for the students, families, and educators who need them.

We believe our collaboration as teachers, parents, and students resulted in findings that were meaningful and actionable – a notable feat for non-professional researchers. We are also hopeful that policymakers, teachers, families, and students alike use our findings to drive local decisions in a way that recognizes that our lived experiences matter a great deal in identifying some of our schools' most intractable problems and promising solutions.

We co-designed our study to provide a scalable model for how students, families, and teachers can help ensure education equity and drive education improvement. In sharing our research and the process behind it, we hope to galvanize others to consider how they too can act as education research partners to both shape the public conversation and to keep public voice in Kentucky's public schools.

Annette Hines is a parent in Rowan County; Natalie McCutchen is a 15-year teacher and current assistant principal in Simpson County; and Spandana Pavuluri is a high school student in Jefferson County. They represent three of the nine members of the Prichard Committee's intergenerational citizen research team. (Photos Attached)